The *Household Words* Journalist as Ethnographer: G. A. Sala's 'Phases of "Public" Life'

Catherine Waters

WITH his scenes of 'every-day life and every-day people', begun as a series of sketches in magazines appearing from 1833, Boz established Dickens's fascination with London street life. Openly avowing his partiality for 'amateur vagrancy', Boz travels through the city observing and describing its inhabitants, grouping and cataloguing them so as to produce a veritable ethnography of urban types and relishing the striking contrasts he discovers in the urban scene. In 'Gin Shops', for example, he moves from the slum dwellings near Drury Lane—with their '[w]retched houses with broken windows patched with rags and paper: every room let out to a different family, and in many instances to two or even three'—to the adjacent gin palace where

> All is light and brilliancy. The hum of many voices issues from that splendid gin shop which forms the commencement of the two streets opposite; and the gay building with the fantastically ornamented parapet, the illuminated clock, the plate-glass windows surrounded by stucco rosettes, and its profusion of gaslights in richly gilt burners, is perfectly dazzling when contrasted with the darkness and dirt we have just left.[1]

The 'amateur vagrancy' practised by Boz continued to influence later urban sketch writers and can be seen in the metropolitan travel writing published by Dickens in *Household Words*. While the journal published city sketches by a range of contributors—John Hannay, William Blanchard

[1] Charles Dickens, 'Gin Shops', in *The Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism*, ed. by Michael Slater and others, 4 vols (London: J. M. Dent, 1994-2000), Vol. I, 180-85 (p. 183).

Jerrold, John Hollingshead, as well as Dickens himself—it is arguably George Augustus Sala who is *Household Words*' pre-eminent urban spectator. His series on 'Phases of "Public" Life' attests to his skills in cataloguing metropolitan types.

Boz's visit to a London 'Gin Shop' was undertaken with an explicitly social reformist aim, alerting his middle-class readers to social miseries lying beyond their ken. The 'inordinate love of plate glass, and a passion for gaslights and gilding' are described as a new mania, and the dazzling splendour of the gin shop evokes Benjamin's methodological concept of the 'dream house', projecting an alluring collective fantasy.[2] From the description of this glittering interior, Boz proceeds to sketch the wretched customers—the two old washerwomen seated to the left of the bar, the 'two old men who came in "just to have a drain"' and who are now 'crying drunk' and the 'knot of Irish labourers at the lower end of the place'—in order to argue that

> until you improve the homes of the poor, or persuade a half-famished wretch not to seek relief in the temporary oblivion of his own misery, with the pittance which, divided among his family, would furnish a morsel of bread for each, gin-shops will increase in number and splendour.[3]

Gareth Cordery has shown how this sketch is bound up with Victorian anxieties about the relationship between public and private life in the construction of modern subjectivity, manifesting 'the crude beginning of a structure central to making money, maintaining control and at the heart of a panoptical public house in an age of capitalism'.[4] But when Sala came to revisit the subject of the public house in a series of essays for *Household Words* on the 'Phases of "Public" Life' some seventeen years later, he was concerned not with the spatial instabilities unsettling the ideology of separate spheres, but rather with surveying the pub as an urban 'type'. Attempting 'a mild classification of the peculiar social characteristics of the different

[2] See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 388-415.

[3] *Dickens' Journalism*, Vol. I, pp. 183-84.

[4] Gareth Cordery, 'Public Houses: Spatial Instabilities in *Sketches by Boz* and *Oliver Twist* (Part 1)', *Dickens Quarterly*, 20:1 (2003), 3-13 (p. 10).

metropolitan "publics"',[5] Sala provides an ethnography of 'London on Tap' that inverts subject-object relations—a narrative strategy that is in keeping with *Household Words*' imaginative engagement with a developing commodity culture.[6] The series appeared in three instalments, the first two published in May and the third in October 1852, and was followed by a number of separate articles on further drinking establishments in 1853.

Our first stop with Sala on his exploration of the 'Phases of "Public" Life' is a gin palace, notable for its promiscuously diverse architectural styles—'We have Doric shafts with Corinthian capitals—an Ionic frieze—Renaissance panels—a Gothic screen to the bar-parlour' ('Chapter the First', p. 226)—and its

> sundry little placards, framed and glazed, and printed in colours telling in seductive language of 'Choice Compounds,' 'Old Tom,' 'Cream of the Valley,' 'Superior Cream Gin,' 'The Right Sort,' 'Kinahan's L.L.,' 'The Dew Off Ben Nevis' [and] the 'Celebrated Balmoral Mixture, patronised by his Royal Highness Prince Albert' ('Chapter the First', p. 227).

Ironically, however, and in contrast to the variety of compounds dispensed, what most distinguishes the gin palace is the stereotyping and homogeneity evident in its customers:

> Like plates multiplied by the electro-process—like the printer's 'stereo'—like the reporter's 'manifold'—you will find duplicates, triplicates of these forlorn beings everywhere. The same woman giving her baby gin; the same haggard, dishevelled woman, trying to coax her drunken husband home; the same mild girl, too timid even to importune her ruffian partner to leave off drinking the week's earnings, who sits meekly in a corner, with two discoloured eyes, one freshly blacked—one of a week's standing. The same weary little man, who comes in early, crouches in a corner, and takes standing naps during the day, waking up periodically for 'fresh drops' ('Chapter the First', p. 227).

---

[5] [George A. Sala], 'Phases of "Public" Life: Chapter the First', *Household Words*, Vol. V, No. 13 (22 May 1852), 224-30 (p. 225). Subsequent page references are to this edition and appear in the text.

[6] I have discussed this aspect of the journal in Catherine Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's 'Household Words': The Social Life of Goods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

Rendered indistinguishable by their forlorn subjection to gin, these customers resemble the 'drainings, overflowings, and outspillings of the gin-glasses' that are allowed to drop through the perforated pewter counter to be 'collected with sundry washings, and a dash, perhaps of fresh material, [which] is, by the thrifty landlord, dispensed to his customers under the title of "all sorts"' ('Chapter the First', p. 227).

Sala's next stop, the Green Hog, belongs to 'a class of publics, becoming rapidly extinct in London': 'one of the old, orthodox, top-booted, sanded-floored taverns' ('Chapter the First', p. 228). Taverns enjoyed their heyday in the seventeenth century, facing competition after the Restoration in 1660 from the increasingly fashionable coffee houses. Symptomatic of the old-fashioned tavern they frequent, the customers of the Green Hog are of the "'old school,"—men who yet adhere to the traditional crown bowl of punch, and the historical "rump and dozen", who take their bottle of wine after dinner, and insist upon triangular spittoons' ('Chapter the First', p. 228). Men like Mr Tuckard:

> [A] round old gentleman, supposed to be employed in some capacity at the Tower of London, but whether as a warder, an artillery-man, or a gentleman jailer—deponent sayeth not. He appears regularly at nine o'clock every morning, eats a huge meat-and-beer breakfast, orders his dinner, re-appears at six o'clock precisely, eats a hearty dinner, drinks a bottle of port, and smokes nine pipes of tobacco, washed down by nine tumblers of gin-and-water […]. He rarely speaks but to intimate friends (with whom he has had a nodding acquaintance for twenty years perhaps) […]. He occasionally condescends to impart, in a fat whisper, his opinions about the funds and the weather ('Chapter the First', p. 228).

As a representative specimen of the 'comfortable and old-fashioned customers' who patronise the Green Hog, Mr Tuckard is a metropolitan type who is at the same time given the features of an individual. His sketch is both generalised and particularised as part of the ethnographic account of a participant observer, whose claim to expertise is that he has 'graduated in Beer' ('Chapter the First', p. 225).

A similar combination of abstraction and individuation is found in the account of the theatrical public house located 'over the way' from the Theatre Royal, Barbican. This 'house of call for Thespians' is patronised by the actors of the Theatre Royal, 'their friends and acquaintances, being actors at other theatres', as well as 'comedians, dancers and pantomimists' ('Chapter

the First', p. 229). Having defined the class of customers, Sala proceeds to identify some of the individuals who compose it:

> At the door, you have Mr Snartell, the low comedian from Devonport, and Mr Rollocks, the heavy father from the Bath Circuit, who affects, in private life, a low-crowned hat with a prodigious brim (has a rich though somewhat husky bass voice), and calls everybody 'My son.' These, and many more dark-haired, close-shaven, and slightly mouldily-habited inheritors of the mantles of Kean, Dowton, or Blanchard, wait the live-long day for the long-wished-for engagements. […] Then there is a little prematurely aged man, Doctor Snaffles, indeed, as he is called, who did the 'old man' line of business, but who does very little to speak of now, except drink ('Chapter the First', pp. 229-230).

The tension between group classification and analysis of individual types in the theatrical pub is compounded by the mixing of roles in public and private life and the sorting of performers into the sub-genres of their profession: low comedy, heavy father, old man and so on. Sala's sketch is an engaged reading of its customers that offers sociological insight into the struggles of those on the fringes of mid-century metropolitan life. Whatever the individual differences observable in the 'various classes of theatrical publics', writes Sala, 'there is common to them all a floating population of old play-goers, superannuated pantomimists, decayed prompters, actors out of engagement, and order-hunters and actor-haunters' ('Chapter the First', p. 230).

Amongst the many varieties of painters who frequent the 'artistic public house'—'grey-headed professors of the old school', 'spruce young fellows who have studied in Paris', 'moody disciples of that numerous class of artists known as the "great unappreciated"'—Sala picks out one who 'very rarely condescends to visit' such a venue:

> [T]hat transcendent genius Mr Cimabue Giotto Smalt, one of the P.P.P.B. or 'Pre-painting and Perspective Brotherhood.' Mr Smalt, in early life, made designs for the Ladies' Gazette of Fashion, and was suspected also of contributing the vigorous and highly-coloured illustrations to the Hatchet of Horrors—that excellent work published in penny numbers by Skull, of Horrorwell Street. Subsequently awakening, however, to a sense of the hollowness of the world, and the superiority of the early Italian school over all others, he laid in a large stock of cobalt, blue, gold leaf, small

> wooden German dolls, and glass eyes, and commenced that course of study which has brought him to the proud position he now holds as a devotional painter of the most aesthetic acerbity and the most orthodox angularity.[7]

This looks at first glance like overdrawn satire at the expense of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But the figure of Mr Cimabue Giotto Smalt is actually an ironic self-portrait of sorts—at least to the extent that Sala himself had served the same apprenticeship that is comically described here in his early life. He had accepted a commission to design some of the 'patterns' and fashion-plates that featured in the *Lady's Newspaper*, a journal launched in 1849 by the engraver Ebenezer Landells, and he subsequently worked for the best part of a year as a draughtsman illustrating Edward Lloyd's gory penny dreadfuls. According to his biographer, Ralph Straus, 'although it is impossible to identify his work it is known that he was responsible for the cuts in *The Heads of the Headless* […] and for those in another "horror" with the appropriate title of *Murder Castle*'.[8] Thus despite the satiric Pre-Raphaelite cliché with which Mr Cimabue Smalt is lampooned—'He paints shavings beautifully, sore toes faultlessly' and 'dresses in a sort of clerico-German style'—Sala ironically infuses him with individual particulars drawn from his own life.

Equally ironic is his description of the artists' models, whose identity is paradoxically established through the versatility of their posing:

> Another pattern is refreshing himself with mild porter at the bar, being no other, indeed, than the well-known Caravaggio Potts, Artiste-modèle, as he styles himself. He began life as Jupiter Tonans, subsequently passed through the Twelve Apostles, and is now considered to be the best Belisarius in the model world. His wife was the original Venus Callipyge, of Tonks, R.A., but fluctuates at present between Volumnia and Mrs Primrose ('Chapter the Second', p. 251).

The description recalls Dickens's ironic tale (in the first volume of *Household Words*) of the bachelor whose perception of the same artist's model

---

[7] [George A. Sala], 'Phases of "Public" Life: Chapter the Second', *Household Words*, Vol. V, No. 14 (29 May 1852), 250-55 (p. 250). Subsequent page references are to this edition and appear in the text.

[8] Ralph Straus, *Sala: The Portrait of an Eminent Victorian* (London: Constable, 1942), p. 57.

being used for the various portraits hung in the Royal Academy is experienced as a haunting by 'The Ghost of Art'.[9] The versatile function of the artist's model as a 'pattern' or 'text-book' for comically incongruous portrait subjects captures the tension between abstraction and particularity that distinguishes the metropolitan sketch tradition. Like the mixture of public and private identities performed by the patrons of the theatrical public house, the artists' public house blends group classification with the detailed delineation of individual types.

Richard Sennett attributes the rise of urban sketches to the problem of coping with an environment of strangers in the wake of the great migrations to the cities that marked the nineteenth century.[10] Brought on not only by the agricultural crises throughout the century associated with new commercial and technological conditions, but also the revolutionary outbreaks that troubled Europe after Napoleon, these migrations gave London a cosmopolitanism reflected in its designation as a 'world' rather than a city.[11] Sala captures this cosmopolitan aspect as he moves on to sketch 'one of the foreign hostelries of London—the refugees' house of call':

> Herr Brutus Eselskopf, the landlord, is a refugee himself, a patriot without a blot on his political scutcheon. He has been a general of brigade in his time; but he has donned the Boniface apron, and affiliated himself to the Boniface guild, and dispenses his liquors with as much unconcern as if he had never worn epaulettes and a cocked hat, and had never seen real troops with real bands and banners defile before him ('Chapter the Second', p. 253).

His pub is located 'in the centre of that maze of crooked, refugee-haunted little streets between Saint Martin's Lane and Saint Anne's Church, Soho'. 'No marked difference can at first be discerned, as regards fittings and appurtenances, between the refugees' and any other public house', says Sala. But 'five minutes' observation of the customers' will reveal that the 'little

[9] [Charles Dickens], 'The Ghost of Art', *Household Words*, Vol. I, No. 17 (20 July 1850), 385-88 (pp. 385-87).

[10] Richard Sennett, 'Foreword', in *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, ed. by Judith Wechsler (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), pp. 7-8.

[11] Tanya Agathocleous examines the literary techniques used to transform the city into an image of the world in Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

back parlour is filled, morning, noon and night, with foreigners under political clouds of various degrees of density, and in a cloud of uniform thickness and of strong tobacco, emitted in many-shaped fumes from pipes of eccentric design'. Sala's sketch of the customers at Herr Eselkopf's reveals his own cosmopolitan sympathies, as he considers how many of them

> have lost everything in the maintenance of what they conscientiously believed to be the right against might, live quietly, honestly, inoffensively, doing no harm, existing on infinitesimal means, working hard for miserable remuneration, willing to do anything for a crust, teaching languages for sixpence a lesson, painting portraits for a shilling apiece, taking out lessons on the flute or pianoforte in bread and meat! ('Chapter the Second', p. 254).

The limits of his cosmopolitan sympathies are, however, evident in the stereotyping shown in the third and final chapter of 'Phases of "Public" Life', where the 'chief object' of the customers who frequent the 'Judaical public-house' of a Sunday morning 'is the buying or selling of […] merchandise'.[12] These patrons are described alongside sketches of a 'fighting' public house (the 'Bottleholder and Sponge')—distinguished by the signs of damage inflicted during former bouts of fisticuffs—and a servants' public house (the 'Cocked Hat and Smalls') characterised by the petty squabbles of flunkeyism.

This third chapter ended the series, but Sala returned to the task of surveying the phases of public life five months later in 'My Swan', a sketch that Dickens considered to be 'so excellent' that he advised W. H. Wills, his subeditor, to publish it as the leader for the issue of 26 March 1853. It describes a fishing public-house 'on the little fishing river Spree', whose landlord, Groundbait, we're told, is 'the *arbiter piscatorium*, the oracle, the *expert juré* of angling': Sala's ostentatious flourish of cod Latin and French sets the mock heroic tone for the description.[13] The parlour of the Swan is replete with 'badges and trophies of the piscatorial craft':

> Rods of all shapes and sizes, eel spears, winches, landing nets, Penelopean webs of fishing tackle, glistering armouries of hooks, harpoons, panniers, bait-cans; and in a glass case a most wonderful

[12] [George A. Sala], 'Phases of "Public" Life: Chapter the Third', *Household Words*, Vol. VI, No. 134 (16 October 1852), 101-05 (pp. 102-03).

[13] [George A. Sala], 'My Swan', *Household Words*, Vol. VII, No. 157 (26 March 1853), 73-76 (p. 73). Subsequent page references are to this edition and appear in the text.

> piscatorio-entomological collection of flies—flies of gorgeously tinted floss silk, pheasants' feathers, and gold and silver thread—flies warranted to deceive the acutest of fish. ('My Swan', p. 74)

Such lavish inventorying of the contents of the parlour is typical of *Household Words*' handling of advertising and commodity culture. Sala clearly enjoys expatiating upon the peculiar displays of the fishing pub: seemingly esoteric exhibits that serve simultaneously to portray the type and yet at the same time to mark its particularised individuality. Thus 'My Swan' can boast the possession of some unique honours:

> Over the fire-place is the identical rod and line with which J. Barbell, Esq. hooked the monstrous and European-famed jack in the river Dodder, near Dublin, and in the year of grace eighteen hundred and thirty-nine; in one corner are the shovel and bucket with and in which at the same place and time the said jack […] was ultimately landed. Conspicuous between the windows is the portrait of J. Barbell, Esq., a hairy-faced man, severely scourging a river with a rod like a May-pole; beneath that, the famous jack himself *in propria persona*, in a glass case, stuffed, very brown and horny with varnish, with great staring glass eyes (one cracked), and a mouth wide open grinning hideously ('My Swan', p. 74).

The mock-heroic effect of Sala's account of these 'trophies' comes from his emphasis upon their authenticity, their identity as originals, and his assumption of their universal renown while at the same time suggesting their localism. They are described in a comic crescendo that culminates in no mere representation, but the prize catch itself: '*in propria persona*'. The stuffed fish, preserving a life-like form but 'swimming vigorously through nothing at all', and having an unnaturally 'neat fore-ground of moss and Brighton-beach shells and a backing of pea-green sky', shares its unrealistic aspect with the portrait of its captor, J. Barbell, and his improbably large fishing-rod. Such exhibits establish the distinctiveness of this public house, alongside the 'varied and eccentric' members of the angling company who frequent it, the whole scene laying itself open to the ethnographic gaze of a spectator like Sala, who is not so much detached, as comfortably at home in this setting:

> If you come to the Swan merely as an observer of the world, how it is a wagging, as I do, you may take your half-pint of neat port with Groundbait, or shrouding yourself behind the cloudy mantle of a

pipe, study character among the frequenters of the Swan ('My Swan', p. 75).

What do these accounts of mid-Victorian public houses tell us then about metropolitan sketch writing in *Household Words*? 'Comparison in urban history is best conducted at the level of particular institutions within the town, rather than between towns as a whole', argues Brian Harrison, and the 'pub and the temperance society, which can be found in most Victorian towns, demand such an approach'.[14] Sala's survey of the 'Phases of "Public" Life' adopts such a comparative approach to give a lively ethnographic survey of contemporary London life. The public house is an evolving institution whose various manifestations, as sketched by Sala, provide an interesting mixture of urban types. Unlike Benjamin's painter of modern life who remains unconscious of his similarity to the commodities upon which he casts his *flâneurial* gaze, Sala's ethnographic portraits are distinguished by a self-conscious awareness of the tension between the classification of a type and the delineation of individual features. Their mode is comic or ironic, and they manifest a narrative blend of journalistic and literary technique that, as I have argued elsewhere, is distinctive of *Household Words* in its imaginative handling of non-fictional prose.[15]

[14] Brian Harrison, 'Pubs', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. by H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 161.
[15] See Waters, *Commodity Culture in Dickens's 'Household Words'*.